

Helen McPhaden and Stardale Women's Group

Stories with Seniors Interview

☐Sun, 11/24/24 1 PM

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INTRO

Welcome to Stories with Seniors, brought to you by Global Shapers Calgary. I'm Emma, and I'm part of a group of young Calgarians under 30 who are passionate about creating meaningful change in our community.

This "podcast" is all about connecting generations. We're sitting down with amazing Calgarians who are 65 and older to hear their stories, learn from their experiences, and bridge the gap between younger and older perspectives. We'll explore how they've made an impact, the legacies they're building, and how Calgary has shaped their journeys.

We're capturing these conversations not just as interviews, but also in blog posts with potential for other creative projects to really cement senior legacies in the city. We hope these stories inspire Calgarians of all ages to come together to further the good work being done over decades past.

Today, we welcome Helen McPhaden, founder and executive director of Stardale Women's Group, an organization dedicated to supporting Indigenous women and girls healing from trauma through community, culture, storytelling, and the arts.

****apologies for the timestamp innaccuracy as a result of this intro!**

BEGINNING

Emma Berger 00:00

So if you could just start with an introduction about yourself, however you would like to introduce yourself in terms of your background and your story, maybe your career or whatever is relevant.

Helen McPhaden 00:15

Okay, so what shaped me, Helen McPhaden, is that I was raised in a very small village in northeastern Saskatchewan, and that village still exists considering how many of the small communities have gone by the wayside over time. And it was called, and is called, Ridgedale, Saskatchewan.

And I'm sure you've heard the saying time and time again that it takes a village to raise a child and I truly believe that. Because it was, I wouldn't say idyllic all the time, but it was the folks, the people, you know, role-based, the general integrity of the community, the values that helped shape me to become the woman that I would grow into.

And also on that note, and I'm the eldest, by the way, of four kids, there's myself, my brother John, my brother Richard, and my sister Regina. So when you're the

eldest, and if you know anything about the roles that children play in the family of origin, I naturally had expectations put on me, so that helped shape my leadership capacity as to who I would grow into in life.

And I also had a very strong Catholic, Roman Catholic upbringing. And my grandparents did not live in Ridgedale. They had a farm and eventually retired, like a lot of people did into Melfort -which eventually is where I would start STARDALE.

And when I reflect also on the work that I grew into, particularly in the Indigenous community, in that little village, the majority of time, we were the only Roman Catholic family. And I was bullied.

And I was, I wouldn't say the word persecuted by other little children, particularly one little girl whose family were born again Christians. And I don't know what they taught in those churches. And I just know that she would come up to me and the things that she would say.

And I couldn't understand that because, you know, being raised in a, and we weren't religious holier than now, please understand that. But being raised in a religious context, I couldn't understand how someone could be so mean-spirited and attacking if we're all supposed to be there living harmoniously and having, you know, try to have a better life for ourselves and for others.

So that's something that always stayed with me. Like why did people treat people like that? Especially little children, right? I could never understand. And as you would well know, those aspects, when a child is like that, they're learning that at home. They're maybe learning it in their churches, I don't know.

But also you can parallel that to racism, which then, through my life became, you know, one of the causes, not the cause, what would the proper word be? One of the challenges that I would try to help overcome for Indigenous women and girls, and the communities. So there was that factor growing up in that little community.

And then the other factor was the way in which I was raised by my family. My father was 20 years older than my mother. So he had lived much of a different lifestyle. And my father and my mother were very much in love, right to the end of when my father passed away and then my mom lived on and she passed away much later.

Helen McPhaden 03:52

But it was those values that my father instilled that we must accept everybody for who they were. And we had, and it was known that the McPhaden's had a revolving door at their home, because there was always people coming and going. You know, you had, definitely Indigenous people always, when they were shunned most of the time.

Forget Ridgedale, the other bigger communities around is where you would see

more Indigenous people, you just didn't see them in Ridgedale. Jewish people, the Jewish people, they had a synagogue nearby, they too were often not looked upon very favorably.

There was Jehovah Witnesses that my father, because one of my businesses, my father, had a construction company. So we always had these people coming and going in our homes. And it was interesting.

And it wasn't until, I mean, I just accepted it as for what it was. And it wasn't until I started university in Saskatoon that two of the boys that I went to school with from one to grade 12, they came over one night with a case of beer. And they were saying, you know, you were so lucky, you had so many interesting people coming through your home. And again, I just took that for granted.

And also, my mother was a real homemaker. And so she believed in feeding everybody. And we didn't have a lot of money. I can tell you that we were lower income while I was growing up. And then we moved into much more income. But everybody was fed and that was just a given.

And so that value is also something I took with me my entire life. And I brought that into Stardale when we started the program 28 years ago.

Because my mother and dad always believed that you should eat well in order to concentrate and to think. And so when you're working with particularly youth that are marginalized and impoverished, you want to ensure that they were fed well.

So that's sort of the beginning of my life, if you will. As I said, it was in Ridgedale, Saskatchewan.

And another part to that, as I said, was with the religious part was with my grandparents, Josephine and Andrew Bednes. Now they were Polish. They both came to Canada at different, well, they were older. My grandfather was older than my grandmother. He was 19 when he came to Canada.

And he had lost a mother and a sister through the influenza or the, I don't think they called it the plague, but it would be similar to what we experienced during COVID. And my grandmother was four years old when she came to Canada. So they were very young. Grandpa's family had lived in the city of Krakow and grandma's family, her father was an accountant for an account in Polish, Austria. So they didn't know how to struggle living in the prairies.

Like I commend, and I've always said this, all those immigrants that came over, my God, what they would have went through. You know, learning how to farm, but they didn't even know how to farm.

And on the Scottish side, the McPhaden's side, I never met my grandparents, because they had left the Melfort region from farming. They were initially, pardon me, from Barrie, Ontario, Lake Simcoe area. And they had moved out west. I'm not sure. I think the early 1900s.

Helen McPhaden 07:32

And then they had retired to Vancouver several years before I was born. So I never, ever did meet them. But I had a very loving, strong relationship with my dad's siblings, his sisters who lived in Vancouver and also in Toronto.

And it was instilled into, to me at least, I can't speak for my siblings, the importance of education. Because dad's sisters were all educated and in a different time and different place. And it was really important for a female to hold her own.

Now my, and I sort of jumped off there. My mother's side of the family, there was also one boy and five sisters. And education was important to them too. And most of my mom's siblings, they all got educated in the health field, nurses, lab techs, and so forth.

But then moving fast forward, and I've talked to my one aunt. Well, I have two aunts that are still alive. She was like an older sister to me, my aunt Rachelle -she lives in Regina, Saskatchewan-. And I would talk to her about what was it like with grandpa and grandma and the Indigenous people?

Because grandma, my mother had told me stories about what it was like growing up on the farm in Brooksby before the family moved to Melfort.

And mom would tell me stories about how grandma was always feeding. And the word was "Indianka", which is Polish for Indian. And grandma was always trying to help the Indigenous people. And my aunt Rachelle would say the same thing.

Yes, grandma would go, this is a small little hamlet. It's not even a village. I wouldn't even know, maybe 50 people live there. I wouldn't know that grandma would go door to door to try to find clothes to help the Indigenous people and always to feed them.

So when grandpa and grandma retired, and they still had a farm, but they retired into Melfort, because of the kind of people they were, Saskatchewan Social Services, and I don't know how this happened, approached them and they would take in children.

They actually raised a girl and a boy that were siblings because of the tragedy of what happened in their own family.

And that boy grew into a man. And he was like a brother and sister, pardon me, a brother to my mom and to her siblings. And he was just a part of our family. He was never formally adopted, but that's just the way it was.

And when they had the 60's scoop, which I didn't wouldn't have known that's what it was called, Grandpa and Grandma were notified through the Saskatchewan Social Services and they took in, I remember two little boys, John and George Campo. And Campo was a well-known Saskatchewan, particularly now over time, matinee.

And those little boys stayed with Grandpa and Grandma, I think for about six months, I really can't recall. And at the same time that they were staying with Grandpa and Grandma in Melfort, these two little Campo girls were staying with another family on a farm outside of Ridgedale. And they were much younger than me and became friends of other people in the community.

And I just recently learned that the one young girl who grew into womanhood had died tragically. And I just learned that this year, unfortunately.

Helen McPhaden 11:12

But, there were all those connections within the Indigenous community. And I remember going to my first rodeo, it was like a powwow on what is called "Fort de La Corne", which is treaty land, when I was nine years old, and I went with my grandparents and with a priest. So my connections to the Indigenous community is long and deep, as well as my first cousin, Jack, who grew up in Vancouver. He married an Indigenous woman who went to residential school in Kamloops, BC, and had five children. So that's my initial connection to the Indigenous community.

Emma Berger 12:05

just finding my unmute there.

Wow, that's incredible that your family was so diverse or had so many like diverse connections and as you said like people coming through your moving through your house and your space all the time just being around you, that definitely sets up people for some form of success I think and being able to engage with people of all walks of life so that's really nice. And then so when you I guess, can you talk a bit about like moving to Calgary when whenever that happened how that happened why that happened

Helen McPhaden 12:50

Well, it happened because there was no work in Saskatchewan. And tragically, the way the government was set up back in the day, I can't recall it all, but it was like a land bank, because Saskatchewan still is the breadbasket of the world. It's massive for producing food through agriculture.

And the government of Saskatchewan, and that was predominantly through the NDP because we still have Crown corporations there. You were not allowed to have external investing. So they passed these bills and policies that a company, let's say from the United States, from a European country, was not allowed to come in and invest in Saskatchewan.

And it was tragic, because whether you were getting an education or you simply wanted to get a job, and you know, a lot of the young boys, and that was typical forever, would leave Saskatchewan to go to Alberta to work on the rigs. You know,

like boys would drop out of school to go to Alberta to work on the rigs. That was just a given, and they could make money.

So in order to go ahead in your life and to have any kind of quality of life, I mean, the expectation was you would work, and there were jobs.

And I don't know the history about these provinces of Alberta, but Alberta and Saskatchewan back in the day were joined at the hip. They were the same province, and they split in 1905. And it just changed dramatically because you had very different governments. And then of course, in this province, there was oil and natural gas.

And with that, that elevated the profile of the province and great wealth. So I left because there was no work, and I also wanted to get more education.

And I came to Calgary. And the reason I came to Calgary, this is a crazy reason. But my girlfriend from university, my roommate from the dorm I lived in, it was like, okay, we're going to take a break. We're going to go to Alberta. Where do we go? Do we go to Edmonton? Or do we go to Calgary? Because we wanted to meet guys. We wanted to meet boys.

And her brother who would work on the rigs, and then go to the university in Saskatoon, had friends here in Calgary that were older than the both of us, and said, go to Calgary. And my girlfriend had come out to Calgary a few months before I was during our Easter break, I think.

And she just kept saying we got to go to Calgary. And I had never even left Saskatchewan before, so got on a plane, and we moved here. And that's how that all happened.

And in coming to this province, I also, you know, continued my education, I worked at various jobs, just like most people that you see that are serving, you know, whether in restaurants or coffee, or that are working in stores or boutiques.

I never looked down on people like that, because, like I've said sometimes, been there done that, you know, like, it's not a holier-than-thou attitude that I have, because we've all had to make our way at some point in time, right.

Helen McPhaden 16:14

And in there, I met my first husband, who was born and raised in Calgary, from old, old Calgary money on both sides of the family. Very fortunate.

And that indoctrinated me into a whole different lifestyle that I could never have imagined, like, you know, the various, you know, meeting Peter Leahy back in the day, the premier and, you know, meeting the Chief Justice and going to the Country Club and the Glencoe, like, it was a whole different world for a little village town Saskatchewan girl, and I was quite naive.

So I met my first husband, his name is Tom, Thomas Boyce. And, you know, I started a modeling agency in there before I, yeah, before we got married. And why

did I do that? Because I was into modeling. And again, Calgary was a very different time and place. I mean, you didn't have what we have now, you know, all the media.

So I was very fortunate to be on the cusp of that, if you will, and get involved with the movie industry that was here back in the day. I've had a colorful life, actually, and we got married in Beverly Hills, California.

At the honeymoon suite of Ava Gardner and Mickey Rooney and I think the average person at that wedding was 60 years old I mean it was sort of a, it wasn't spur of the moment we'd been traveling and decided to get married and, this gentleman Ron Kinney who had grown up in Calgary with Tom's mom Shirley had been a figure skater in the ice capades and he ended up in Hollywood because he was gay. And it was again, it was a very different time and place for gay people and Ron threw a wedding for us.

So I got married there, continued with my business, helped my husband with his business, he helped me with mine, and then we had two sons. I had Chris, Christopher and then I had Kalin.

And from there you know we were married for a number of years and then we got a divorce, and I had the children and raised the children. And in there and this is the sad part I met a man who was somewhat older than me, who was a con man, he was a criminal.

And I won't get into the whole backstory but he was involved with what is called proceeds of crime he literally stripped me of everything, he used me to get to other people.

And I ended up back in Saskatchewan, I guess it would have been five years after meeting him, and I wasn't around him most of the time because he was gone and doing all kinds of devious things.

But I was left homeless at that, I had nothing. I lost my home that I had owned, my vehicles. I mean, I had nothing except my two children and two dogs and so that's how that transpired.

Emma Berger 19:23

Gosh, I'm so sorry. That sounds like a really rough time and sequence of events to lead to that point. Yeah, I'm so sad. I'm sorry that you had to go through that. But I'm sure, as you'll probably mention, it had an impact on you at some point. I'm sure that led to something. I mean, of course it did because you're here today with a big legacy in history.

So, sorry, I'm just reading over my questions to figure out where to jump in. I suppose, yeah, I'm interested in hearing how STARDALE came about from there and how you worked yourself out of that time period.

Helen McPhaden 20:11

With trauma and being homeless with nothing, right? Yeah. So I have a line that I use. I understand. So when I hear people talking to me, because people, I'm an empath. I'm an empath. So I take everything in and I'm highly sensitive. And people tend to come to me and tell me everything. And that just fits naturally with my work, obviously, through Stardale.

But, I understand because I have walked the mile in someone's shoes or moccasins, you know, like you're already starting to hear some of my story, right? And going back to Saskatchewan, so I ended up living with my mom and my brothers. We have a family home just outside of Tisdale, Saskatchewan. And I lived there for two years. They took care of me.

I actually had a complete breakdown in there, not even knowing that I was broken down. But it was because, you know, the person that I was, I had to go through this dark night of the soul, to raise up again. And I know one of my elderly friends -he's long gone- he used to say to his daughter, and she said to me, if anyone can get through anything, it's Helen.

And it's because I do have that resiliency at my very core. So as I'm living at the farm -by the way, this man, the con man, I thought I was still with, but he was down in Florida, and he was already involved with the FBI and a whole other ugly story. I knew I had to work.

So my work had already been, you know, considerable through the Indigenous community here in Calgary because I had been the first agency in Calgary for modeling to have a whole Indigenous division. Nobody did that back in the day. I mean, I was doing fashion shows at the Stampede, you know, in the big four building and at the tipi village.

I had been part of an Indigenous women's organization here, that we started, and we were doing all kinds of programming. So I had already, in plus with my education, I had developed a series of lessons to work with Indigenous women.

So fast forward, I'm in Saskatchewan, I need to work. Rule of thumb, reach out to the Indigenous community.

And so I, you know, this one woman I met, she was a friend of our family's. She had come for tea one day, and we're just talking, talking, she said: "Oh, you need to go to Archibald, Saskatchewan and meet Clarence Campbell". And Clarence is head of Métis Nation Three. He is long gone, and he ended up there, there's a Clarence Campbell Memorial. I mean, he was well known.

So I would drive in these snowstorms on these terrible roads, being a city driver, not used to driving on country roads anymore. I would go to their Monday morning meetings.

Through that I met another organization, a Métis organization in Melfort that it just started. And I can tell you, I didn't eventually, I did not have good dealings with them, because there was a lot of scamming going on.

But I got my foot in the door. And because of my background, and I knew how to write proposals, I wrote a proposal for this Métis group in Melfort. And they got funding.

And that was the start, if you will, of them, and I actually helped them find a space through someone I knew in Melfort. We would do, I think the first time was a six week program, five days a week, for women that had been abused.

Helen McPhaden 24:04

And then they got more funding using my proposal. And then we did another section, and it was much more intense.

But as I was getting into it, I realized, you know, that we had to really expand, at least I had to expand my vision on what we were doing with the women, because these women had been so victimized and traumatized.

So that group of women that started in September of 1996, I think it was 96, they graduated probably the beginning of December. And then they said to me, Helen, we need to do this for other women. Like, this has helped us so much. You've helped us so much. What can we do?

So we started to form Stardale, and it will be 28 years this December.

We started to meet and, you know, my mind.

You know, was like, we'll take this, what I've developed, we'll expand upon it.

I'll develop course material around boundaries. And I had also taken some training here in Calgary with Dr. Charles Whitfield on codependency, on inner-child work, on art therapy, I'll start developing all those materials. And we started STARDALE.

Like, we started first of all local.

So by the beginning of 1997, Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, that's up in that region, they had what was called the Aboriginal Women's Council. It had been around for 25 years at that time. And so in Saskatchewan, there was much more going on than here for Indigenous people.

And you'd think with the sheer volume of people, particularly in Treaty 7 and wealth, there would be more going on. That was not the case at all. And so we drove to Prince Albert, myself and a couple of the ladies, we met with everyone there, we said, this is what we want to do. That was January 1997, we formed a local. And I think it was the next month we formed Stardale

It was like, and I could be wrong there, I could be wrong. But it was like, well, we got to come up with a name. They said, well, you can have a name. And we were local,

whatever it was. So we're all sitting, yeah, it was in February, that's right. Because it was a long, long table. And we were looking out the windows, and it was just so cold, it was minus 36.

And we're all sitting there, this whole group of women. And it was like, okay, you can come up with a name. And it was like, I'm like, duh. I was like, name? What do you mean a name? And so out of it, we came up with STARDALE. So it has a dual meaning. It means Father-Sky for Star, Dale for the Earth, because dales are on the Earth. And then we were meeting at Jackie Hunt. So she is Cree, treaty 6.

We would meet at her house in STARDALE, or in Star City, pardon me. So Star was for Star City. And Dale was for Tisdale, because some of the women came from Tisdale, and I was from Tisdale at that time. And then eventually, we would open our offices in our center in Melfort, because Melfort was the hub in that region for all government offices, and it was the biggest center. So we started that process.

And then every week, we had meetings at Jackie's Hunt, at Hunt's home. And I was organizing meetings across the region. So we would meet with the different Nipawin, Melfort, Tisdale, even over to Hudson Bay Porcupine Plain, which was east.

Helen McPhaden 28:11

We would meet with the different health districts at that time, with the Cumberland College, we would meet with the different, like, Melfort Ministerial Association, I think there were 16 churches. We were always meeting. So what I'm trying to express is we were doing things very mindfully and carefully.

We just didn't steamroll through and say, okay, we're going to start this organization, we're going to do this. And I know that this was from God, that this was from Creator, this was through prayer. And I was much better at discernment then than I am now. I'm relearning some of that. So you would just go with it. At the same time, you know, I was doing work for 'SAS' Justice in La Loche.

I was doing work as a consultant around family violence. I was working for the local college on contracts while we were putting Stardale together and having these meetings and constructing everything. And then I was hired by Human Resources Canada and by 'New Start', which is equivalent in Alberta to 'Alberta Works' for people on low income.

And I was hired in and it was really good, in fact, because I wasn't biased. I'd lived away for so long. And I saw how that the people that lived up there all the time were given contracts and they didn't even necessarily have the education or the proper experience, they would just simply give them the contracts year after year. So I was brought in to do what is called a needs assessment for Indigenous women and women of poverty.

And that helped also cement Stardale, those findings. And then we formally opened

the offices, which was around 3000 square feet, January of 1998. and we would run programs five days a week from nine o'clock to three o'clock because these women had children. Like most of those women were 24 years old with four to six kids. That's a simple fact.

And those women would drive in from the different reserves, Cree and Saulteaux reserves, the small little communities around Melfort area and within Melfort and Tisdale and Star City also. So we had women across that region and what was also very interesting for me is that we really broke down stereotypes.

Even the Saulteaux women against the Cree or vice-versa or the Métis women helping women to find their identity. And it was simple as we're all women. And for me, I understood because I had been brought to my knees. I had been in poverty. I had lost everything. I had gone through violence and abuse. I could relate to those women. And I have said emphatically that those women helped heal me. We all healed together. It was not one-upmanship. We all healed together.

So our first program went from January and then into April. A couple of days a week, we had partnered with the local college. We started integrating what was called upgrading for those women so they could get their GED. And then we had the women go into a program.

And I think the first program was around office administration assistance. So that had come through that assessment that I had done to find these women work, to find employment, to break the cycles of poverty, abuse, and dependency on social welfare.

Helen McPhaden 32:02

Those were the key factors of why we did this. And then we kept doing the program, holding it over and over again. I know we did another one through that assessment was to do with daycares. And James Smith Crenation started a daycare. They still have it running to this day. A couple of those women that took that program are still running it.

That was important so that women could work and had a safe place to take their children and those children were cared for. So that's basically how the program all started. And then in there, we really expanded into the arts. And I was always doing art with the women, pardon me, therapeutic artwork it's called, and release work. But then we did a project called The Sacred Weft.

And it was a revival of West Coast, West Kootenay Salish people. And I had done a research project in 1998 in the Navajo Nation in the United States. And I was down there for a month. And again, this was creator just kept [coming to me] through dreams, through art that I would see it just, it happened. And when I got back to Canada that August, I went to, it was called ACAD, Alberta Arts University.

And this is unusual, but her name was Helen. I can't think of her last name. She was head of the department. And no one's around in the summer, but she was there. She'd just come back from holidays. And she was gracious and met with me. And I said, I want to do this project in Saskatchewan with this West Coast Salish weaving, because, and I'd seen it in Oaxaca when I was much younger.

It's so beautiful and it's healing and it releases, you know, the endorphins in the brain, it frees the mind up for the women to create beauty out of healing. And she says, I have the perfect person for you, Katharine Dickerson. She's the head of the fiber arts department, but she's out in her land out in the BC right now. So that transpired into an agreement.

And we still have an agreement with Alberta University of Arts. And I wrote proposals to at that time, it was the Aboriginal Healing Foundation. And that was as a result of the residential schools. And that foundation was to help people that had gone to residential schools or the next generation, I think. So I was able to secure funding and met with Katharine a few times.

And in 2000, Yes, it would have been 2000. One of the young women who actually had nine children, and she was early 30s, Linda Merriam, had never been on an airplane. She flew out to Calgary for the beginning of June and lived in what we call the 'think tank' with Katharine.

And Katharine taught her stitching, all the dyes are natural, integrated her into the Calgary area of Treaty seven, took her to the Buffalo jump and so forth. And then Linda flew back to Calgary. Katharine drove, or pardon me, she flew back to Saskatchewan. And then Katharine drove from Calgary out to Melfort. She lived with me for, I think it was six weeks, and brought her daughters out.

And then we transformed part of our center into a center around the weaving.

Helen McPhaden 35:51

That was a whole other piece. And so Linda was mentored by Katharine and could continue on which Katharine left, but Katharine was there wholeheartedly and really got into the soil that we have out in Saskatchewan, the different kinds of hemp that we grew and flax for linen because we had to know how to work and incorporate that.

No chemicals in the dyes, it was all rainwater, slew water, snow water. So we started that process. And then from there, and I won't get into the whole story, but those weavings, they came with me to Spain to an international women's conference.

They were in Wanuskewin Historical Museum in Saskatoon, the Cumberland Gallery in the Legislative building in Regina, the Calgary Stampede Great Western Museum, the Glenbow Museum for five years and then they were in an oil and gas company

here in Calgary. We now have them back.

And I'll be talking a little bit more about what we're going to be doing, but we will be looking to have those weavings in my intention to go back to Saskatchewan and housed there in Saskatchewan because it was predominantly Cree and Saulteaux women that did that. So that happened.

Then the women were saying, we need to do something about the girls because the young Indigenous girls around here are in serious trouble. They are not only the victims of violence, but they've also become the perpetrators of violence. And they were, you know, like some of the boys, young boys in high school, I interviewed, they put the girls, put the boots to their heads. The girls were violent.

And at the same time that this is all going on, I'm also working back into Alberta with Stardale on various projects, writing proposals, getting asked to work at like Siksika Reserve to teach the healers at White Buffalo Lodge and so forth. So there's always something going back and forth for me between the two provinces.

And then we did a research project through the University of Saskatchewan, which is in Saskatoon with one of the ladies, Dr. Stephanie Martin, with a psychologist. So she was lead on that. And I hired in consultants. And at the same time that I was doing that in Melfort, it got really ugly for me. I mean, I was afraid for my life.

Thank God for my Rottweiler, because there was the [Reena Virk trial](#) going on out in Victoria for the young woman who was bullied and died. And I was starting to get phone calls because of the uniqueness of my work from Montreal to Vancouver to Edmonton to whatever. And I'm not afraid to speak, but when you live in a small closed community like Melfort, I became a threat.

And what also happened at the same time, and this needs to be public and it needs to be explained, is that when I went to do that research project, you bring in everybody, you know, and there is what is called the Northeastern Crisis Centre. And I'd always worked with them over the years. Well, they got a new executive director in and I'd asked to meet with her a couple of times.

She just didn't want to meet with me. So be it, you know, we're doing our work too, but it would have been nice to collaborate.

Helen McPhaden 39:35

And because we were a charity, we were receiving funding, you know, through various means, and particularly for our research project. And I'd also gone to the superintendent of the school division for Melfort at that time. And there was a gentleman there, and I can't think of his name, He had been a school teacher and he had, was part of that meeting.

And I said, well, I, you know, superintendent, we've got along great. We're going to

do this, this really good project to help determine why all these young girls are so violent and let's put some interventions in place. And, um, not the superintendent, but this other gentleman, he was to go notify the Northeastern crisis center and some of these other frontline workers. He says, Oh, I'll go do that.

He never did. He never did. So whatever transpired behind the scenes, all these people became very angry with me, they were very upset that I was bringing attention around girl gang violence and girl violence. And yet the same time that that happened, the Globe and Mail, um, Graham Green, I think is his last name. He was, he was in a correspondent.

He flew to Saskatchewan with a photographer and came out to Melfort to interview me and many of these young girls that I was working with in an afterschool program. Plus we're doing the research project. And I still have the article. It was one full page on a Saturday of [what's wrong with the girls of Melfort](#), and it was all on the girls' gangs and their stories and intergenerational impacts.

Well, that even ramped things up further. And I was being threatened. Like I tell you, I was scared. I was really scared to leave my home at times. And I've never ever publicly said anything about that. The women I've worked with know that, but I've never publicly stated that. So that was happening. And then I was also, as I said, doing more work in Calgary. Then we go to 2004.

Both of my sons were in a terrible car accident, leaving my youngest son, high level paraplegic. And that happened July 30th, 2004. So that's 20 years ago now. So I had just, I can't say moved to Calgary, but I had taken on a space in Calgary where I was going to do two other projects, you know, cause you're expanding, right, on literacy and education.

So when that happened, that brought me to my knees and I was just totally incapacitated, like, I mean, how could I even run STARDAL because your son's in the hospital and this was, he was in actually Saskatoon University hospital for months on end.

And then he was airlifted to Calgary because this is initially where our roots were, um, my children's family roots and my home in Saskatchewan was a two and a half historical brick home. It couldn't accommodate him and I couldn't take care of him. So that's when the gears switched and I believe again, in divine intervention from my perspective, that that's where I switched everything to Calgary.

I was still operating some programming in, uh, Saskatchewan. And that went on for, I don't know, I'll save at least five, six years. So I was driving back and forth every two weeks, but Calgary then became the home base.

Emma Berger 43:14

Wow, yeah, that's so much life to have lived. Yeah, that's just, I mean, so tragic, of

course, what happened to your son and the car accident. I'm so sorry. But I, yeah, I'm picking up on a lot of what you're saying in terms of 'divine intervention.'

Healing spiritually is obviously a big component with the work you do and with just sort of the guiding factors in your life. I think that's really important and really an interesting perspective, I think, that perhaps, you know, perhaps people don't really listen to or acknowledge in their lives so much anymore the *needing*, the need to do what you need to do.

I don't know, it feels like you have like a really strong drive with that influence. So I guess with that, I'm wondering how did you integrate that into the work that was done in terms of influencing the young girls that you ended up working with? Like, obviously, they have gone through a lot if they're engaged in violence and healing is a big component to that.

So yeah, oh sorry, I'm just checking my notes and other other threads I wanted to pick up on. Yeah, I mean, you mentioned a lot about like different partners, different organizations that ended up coming on board to support this project.

So yeah, I suppose it's kind of two different threads in terms, you know, healing and spirituality and then sort of partnerships and collaboration, but perhaps there's a tie to community there. I'm sure that's a big aspect of your work. So yeah, I guess just talking about how this change really comes about, like how do you actually make an impact on such a big issue like this?

Helen McPhaden 45:34

That's a good question. Thank you. So going back to the beginning of Stardale to even where we're at now. And you have to look at the Indigenous community, right? It's, you got to look at the Indigenous community, you got to look at women through time. You know, I used to joke about, well, we women can go back and forth.

You know, I'm talking about girl gang violence and violence, like the police that I worked with RCMP and city police would say, yeah, you know, the girls, they just don't give up like they can, they manipulate, they keep going, guys duke it out and their friends and they get over it.

Well, transform that to women coming together in solidarity, girls coming together, all ages of women and girls, it doesn't matter. And then look at it also from the Indigenous perspective of tribe, and how those tribes, their intricacy of how they worked over time, like that is so paramount.

And I don't want to go down the path of the white feminists, because I hope to God I've never been that because that was part of the problem through time, you know, going back into the 1800s, how women have really, for the do-gooders, if you will, I don't consider myself a do-gooder, I never have. I'm someone that, again, spirituality, if you will, I work with it, I love what I've done.

I've got that passion, that commitment, and I like to see people thrive and succeed in their lives. That's so important to me. I mean, you can't see all my books here. I've got a bookcase and then some of books about women, women in circle, women coming together, women sharing.

And, you know, when I look at the young girls at STARDALE, the catchment ages, 10 to 17, those are very impressionable ages, right? And I guess, again, all I have to do is keep thinking back in my life, what did I learn at those ages? What was important to me? And if you can stay true to that at all times, you know, who impacted me in my life?

And sometimes it only takes that one person once a month to say something. But on the same token, I know as someone who has led this organization, that I have to be very, very careful what I say, I can't just spew stuff out of my mouth, because people can internalize it and believe what I say, I have to be factual, you know, I just can't just say stuff for the sake of saying it.

And, you know, the young women that have come to STARDALE, you know, I got to throw this out there to mentorship, that's just become such a big word. To me, I never used to look at the word mentorship, because I had women in my life at various points of my life that, and I can name them, you know, how they really empowered me.

And at the time, I probably didn't even realize that, you know, like just the way they, they presented themselves, what they said to me, and it's still in the back of my mind, right, or Helen, you should do this, or maybe you shouldn't do that, or, or what do you think of this, you know, like, they instilled something in me also.

Helen McPhaden 49:02

And so, you know, I was thinking of this the other day, I remember this one woman who was volunteering and then working at STARDALE part time and demanding, I want you to be my mentor, I want you, like, what the hell does that mean? Like, I'm not there to mentor somebody. I'm there to work as a collective in a group as part of a community. You know, again, not one person is better than the other.

We're all in this together. And I do have continually women of all ages that have said to me, you've been such a mentor to me. And when they say that, just out of the blue, sort of like, well, thank you. And then I, because I don't know what else to say, right? It's like, I mentored somebody, okay, I didn't realize that, because I don't look at myself in that way.

I simply have never looked at myself in that way. And going back to having to mentor someone would be such a huge obligation for me because I take things so seriously, I wouldn't want to put myself into that situation. Whereas my care and my concern for the work that I've done with the young girls That's so important to me.

And then, you know, I always, the wraparound of services.

So then if you were at a STARDALE class at a session, you would see other young women. You'd see all these other women. You know, you've got women in the kitchen that are preparing meals and foods and then later snacks and bagging up food to go home to feed those children. You would have women that are perhaps doing a school practicum that I'm supervising. That I take very seriously.

You would have women that are, you know, at university wanting to get more of an understanding of the Indigenous community. You would have Indigenous women that don't know about their culture because they've been through various systems like foster care, or it was never talked about in their home. So it's a real variety of women that I've had the opportunity to surround myself with.

And it hasn't always been easy. It's been really frustrating for me since COVID. You know, we followed every protocol in place for COVID because of our funding stream. And, you know, the needle is five people per one person and the expansion, you know, whether we were outside or whatever, you know, we thrived because we produced three short films. We did - I can't remember everything we did.

We were able to actually feed people, which is like on mass, get medical supplies out, teach people to get on media, like children, get them used equipment, new equipment. Like it was ballistic. My dear friend, Eugene Stickland, the playwright who knows everybody in the arts community, he said, Helen, it just dro- and it's true. It went to a grinding halt.

We escalated 10 times over, but it took its toll on me. I can tell you that. I didn't realize it at the time. And when I look at the women, you know, after COVID, the women, you know, coming out of the universities, their inability to initiate and help the girls.

Helen McPhaden 52:37

I mean, we have online training. We have our whole Moodle platform from the beginning of contact right up today. Like so much work went into that. You study that. You learn, I call it experiential learning at Stardale, hands-on, because that's also very Indigenous. It's hands-on, right?

And yet these women that are coming out of university with their degrees stand around not knowing how to interact with the girls. And myself and some of my senior team, it's like it's pulling a rabbit out of a hat, trying to figure out how come they can't talk? How come they can't interact with the girls? And then you've got the girls, you know, when COVID came.

So many of them are so under socially developed because of the masks, because of being put on screens. You know, parents and guardians are very concerned about that. So, you know, you've got that dual impact and the absolute struggle of getting

that girl child to be able to communicate, because communication is so important at Stardale.

It's to teach those girls how to use their voice, to make them strong, that empowerment factor. If they're gonna rise up to be a young Indigenous woman, they have to have a voice. They need to speak up. And that to me, again, is so very, very important.

You know, the impact, community, very blessed, very fortunate to have had the acceptance, to have the love, to, I'd say, roll with it within the Indigenous community, particularly here in Treaty 7.

You know, going back generations now for me, you know, one of my friends who's Sitenna, she said, oh God, to me, about 10, 15 years ago, she said, Helen, you know, when you left, when I went to Saskatchewan, she showed her hand. She said, everything broke. That whole chain of helping women and girls broke behind you. So we're very unique. There's nothing like us in Calgary.

We're not operating programs right now, because we're on a whole different trajectory. But we want to take what we've developed, which is called the Stardale model, which is what I developed way back in 1998, and to start transferring that out. And... I mean, collaborations, we've worked with so many people, not just in Alberta and Treaty 7, but across Canada.

I've been privileged in my career to often be the only white woman with all Indigenous women at functions in Ottawa, Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, to speak about the work that I do at STARDALE. So my community isn't just Calgary and I've never looked at it as just Calgary. Maybe that goes back to what my dad taught us, right? It's expansive.

It goes all across the provinces and the country and I've worked in the United States also.

Emma Berger 55:57

Everything, every time you stop talking, I just have a moment of going, wow. Yeah, there's just so much that you've obviously learned and applied throughout your life. It's very inspiring, I think, probably to a lot of people who have referred to you as a mentor, I can see why.

But I, yeah, I'm seeing a real like humility and carefulness that you've taken throughout your life and your work with STARDALE and outside of it, that I think is probably pretty fundamental to your approach with changemaking, to say that.

And yeah, there's just so much to learn from the approach that you take, I suppose, and that people take in how they carry out their work that I think is so important. I could talk about experiential learning forever, because I did a project with Youthful

Cities, which is like an organization for essentially making cities better for young people.

And just there's so much of a need right now, like education is supposed to be so much more developed and better. And it's been encouraged for so long, but there's an obvious lack of social group skills, communication, just experience, jobs need experience, the whole world needs experience, you can't just stare at a screen and expect to pick up on important life lessons.

So I guess with that, I'm acknowledging our time, just over an hour, trying not to, you know, keep you here all day. But is there, I'm sure there is, anything that you would say is like the, sorry, I'm trying to figure out the wording of this, I guess. Like your impact that you have, the legacy that you want to have is obviously a big conversation and the thing you're thinking about right now.

So are there like, perhaps takeaways from your life, life lessons, things that you're trying to implement now to sort of preserve that legacy?

Helen McPhaden 58:25

Yeah, that's perfect to end on that note, because what we're doing at Stardale is we are in the process of archiving all the historical work of Stardale. And the reason is, is because Indigenous peoples oral culture and so much has been lost through history. Thankfully, those that had the traditional knowledge and medicines kept that going. And that's far and few between.

So Stardale, if you look at it as an organization, almost 28 years old here, we have a lot of value at it. We've got our research projects, we've got our books that we wrote, like around the sexual abuse of the girl child, when no one would even talk about it, right? Committing suicide.

And just so that you're aware, these are groups of individuals within Stardale that gave their life blood, their thought and creative processes to help create the books, the stage productions, our short films, our research projects. I mean, we're talking volumes of people here.

So we made the decision and we started this in September of this year and we're giving ourselves at least a year to really concentrate. And it is a task to itself to take the research, to do the archiving. I've got a wonderful team of individuals that are close to me that have been assembled. We're doing that. And also, Emma, we're going to write a book. So that's gonna be my legacy is the book.

I love to write. I've got Eugene Stickland, who's going to help me. He's been chomping at the bit. And I said, you just gotta, because there's so much to go through and it's how do we tackle it? Like my story, do we interview some of the girls, some of the women? We're going to put in the QR codes with links to our various films that we've done because that's all out there.

I mean, you can rent those short films. They're historical into itself, particularly [The Road](#), which has won so many awards for missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. So, since the Indigenization thing started to happen a few years ago, people are getting into it. Well, we started it in the ice age. We're way ahead of the trajectory. So we need to now compile all that. And that's paramount.

And one of the things I know that we did, you probably saw, was our last short film that we did was called '[The Rise](#)'. And you can rent that on our website. But we really need to get that out more because it starts to tell the story somewhat of STARDALE. So we haven't figured out the strategy yet. We're still in that creative process of aligning the book.

You know, is the book gonna align then with the various transfers of knowledge? Because the STARDALE's model, always for me, when I developed what it was, yes, we're gonna do the project here, but it can be done anywhere else in Canada to the United States and Australia, New Zealand. Why not take that methodology and supplant it and make it work there because we know it works.

It's been documented for years, right? And so we're working on that. You know, we're thinking of podcasts. We have access to a podcast studio. So there's so much more work ahead of me. I don't know. I just take it one day at a time right now.

Emma Berger 01:02:21

That is incredible. I'm so excited for you and for the rest of this journey and preserving all that knowledge. I'm personally very interested in knowledge management or information, whatever you want to call it. There's a lot of terms for it. But yeah, I don't know.

I just I am also from the perspective of wanting to share knowledge and things that I've already learned about trying to make change or just the approach in that. But really like in sharing and advocating for the work that's already being done because there's always so much work that's being done everywhere.

And I am also very passionate about collaboration and just sort of weaving the threads together, I suppose. So personally, I would love to help out or help promote or engage with the work that's being done for Stardale. If there's openings or opportunities or even just sharing social media, I'm happy to help, whatever that looks like.

But yeah, I'll give you the opportunity if you have anything left, I suppose, that you want to say, anything you want to close with, anything that's perhaps the big takeaway that you want people to have in terms of your life lessons that you have to give. I mean, you don't have to be, I know, the big question to be like, hey, can you sum this up?

You definitely don't have to be like, I guess, like there doesn't have to be like a big one thing, but just wanting to give you about your journey.

Helen McPhaden 01:04:08

Gosh, I don't know. My life has been interesting and hard. I don't know, like find your passion, find what works for you and it might not happen overnight, but find what works for you and excel at it. Give it your all. Like just throw yourself into it and do it. And you'll be surprised what will happen. You know, like just the people you meet, the opportunities that come your way, it brings joy.

Like the work I've had, it not been easy by any means, you know, listening to the people's stories and dealing with people's behaviors, but it has brought me joy. Otherwise I wouldn't have done it. Like what the hell for, you know, like I enjoyed what I've done. And that's the most important thing I think. And you know, we've alluded to the spiritual aspects. Like that's what's kept me grounded.

Like we are, you know, the physical body, but we've got this spirit and that connection and all that, that looks like, you know, and having faith because it's that faith that's propelled me forward to be able to do the work I've done. That's it in a nutshell.

Emma Berger 01:05:24

That is incredible. I'm so excited. Just currently hearing from you excited about my future, excited about the rest of your future. And yeah, this is this is so great. I'm so excited. I'm so happy to be doing this work. I'm so grateful to have had you as an interviewee. So thank you so much for your time. And thank you to Maca and Azin for supporting, for taking copious notes, I'm sure. Big takeaways.

I hope, I don't know, I hope this is impactful. Thank you so much as well.

Helen McPhaden 01:06:03

and sharing everything to us. Yeah. And I also want to thank you both for letting me the opportunity for being here. And as well as Emma said, it was very inspiring, not only for all the stories, but all the resiliency that you have to change things over the time. And your stories, I think I understand what everyone said but your mentor, it was very inspiring. You're welcome. Thank you, ladies.

Thank you. And I like to have fun. One thing I like to do.

Emma Berger 01:06:43

Having fun, yeah that can be super important in the whole resiliency aspect like like you said if there's no joy then like what are you doing. Yeah thank you so much.

[End of Recording.]